

VEHICLE LOAD WARNING SYSTEM

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION(S)

[0001] The present application claims priority from U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 60/459,699, filed on April 1, 2003, which is hereby incorporated in its entirety by reference thereto.

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0002] The present invention is directed to load warning systems, and more particularly to load warning systems for vehicles.

BACKGROUND

[0003] Vehicles, such as trucks, typically have maximum load ratings set by the vehicle manufacturer. Many vehicles have payload areas that can be loaded with a payload that could exceed the maximum load rating. The payload areas can also be improperly loaded with a payload even though the payload doesn't exceed the maximum load rating for the vehicle. For example, a payload below the maximum load rating could be located too far to one side or too far to the rear, thereby changing the handling or steering characteristics of the vehicle. It is highly desirable to provide a warning system that indicates when a vehicle is improperly loaded.

[0004] Prior systems have been designed to accurately measure the payload weight or axle weight. Most of these systems use load cells to support the weight and provide an electrical signal indicative of the weight. Some systems have relied on the deflection of the vehicle's suspension to provide an indication of load. As an example, US Patent No. 3,531,766 to Henzel discloses such a sensing system for overload indication. US Patent Nos. 4,789,033; 5,522,468;

and 6,259,041 B1 to Dohrmann show various systems that translate suspension travel into motion that can be measured. The sensor output is sent to a display unit that gives an indication of weight. These prior art systems, while detecting weight, have limitations in determining or detecting improper load conditions in a vehicle.

SUMMARY

[0005] The present invention provides a load warning system that overcomes drawbacks experienced in the prior art and that provides additional benefits. Under one aspect of the invention, a load warning system is provided for use with a vehicle. The vehicle has a load-support portion adapted to receive a load thereon. A first portion of the vehicle, such as a frame, is coupled to the load-support portion. A second portion of the vehicle, such as an axle or suspension system, is movable relative to the first portion upon application of the load onto the load-support portion. The load warning system has an engagement portion mountable to and movable with the one of the first portion or second portion of the vehicle as a unit.

[0006] A load indicator is mountable to the other one of the first portion or second portion of the vehicle. The load indicator is configured to be spaced apart from the engagement portion and to be in a first position when the load on the load-support portion is less than a maximum load. The load indicator is also configured to engage the engagement portion and move to a second position when the load on the load-support portion is greater than a maximum load. The load indicator provides a signal upon being moved to the second position. A warning indicator is coupled to the load indicator to receive the signal and to provide an overload warning to a user upon receiving the signal.

[0007] Under another aspect of the invention, a load warning system has an engagement portion movable with a vehicle's frame or a vehicle-support portion. A load indicator is coupled to the other one of the vehicle-support portion or the frame. The load indicator is spaced apart from the engagement portion when in a

first position. The load indicator is configured to move to a second position and engage the engagement portion when the load applied to the load-support portion exceeds a first maximum load. The load indicator is also configured to move to the second position and engage the engagement portion when the load applied to the load-support portion exceeds a second maximum load less than the first maximum load and when the load is positioned rearward of the load indicator or the engagement portion. A warning indicator is coupled to the load indicator and configured to provide an overload warning to a user in response to the load indicator moving to the second position.

[0008] Under another aspect of the invention, a load warning system has an engagement portion movable with the vehicle-support portion or the frame of a vehicle. A load indicator is coupled to the other one of the vehicle-support portion or the frame. The load indicator is spaced apart from the engagement portion when in a first position. The load indicator is also configured to move to a second position and engage the engagement portion when the frame moves a selected distance relative to the vehicle-support portion in response to the load being applied to the load-support portion. The load support portion has a switch assembly and a trigger coupled to the switch assembly. The trigger is resiliently bendable against the engagement member after the load indicator is moved to the second position. A warning indicator is coupled to the load indicator and configured to provide an overload warning to a user in response to the load indicator moving to the second position.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0009] Figure 1 is a side elevation view of a vehicle with a load warning system in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

[0010] Figure 2 is an enlarged partial schematic plan view of a load-support portion of the vehicle of Figure 1 with a load thereon.

[0011] Figure 3 is an enlarged top isometric view of the load warning system mounted on the vehicle of Figure 1.

[0012] Figure 4 is a partially exploded enlarged isometric view of components of the load warning system of Figure 3 shown removed from the vehicle.

[0013] Figure 5 is an enlarged isometric view of an alternate embodiment of the load warning system mountable on the vehicle of Figure 1.

[0014] Figure 6 is an enlarged bottom isometric view of components of an alternate embodiment of the load warning system on the vehicle of Figure 1.

[0015] Figure 7 is a schematic plan view of the load warning system on the vehicle of Figure 1 showing wire routing along the vehicle.

[0016] Figure 8 is an enlarged plan view of a relay assembly of the electrical components of the load warning system of Figure 1.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0017] The following discussion provides a general overview of the orientation and structure of the load warning system and associated components of one or more embodiments of the present invention. Throughout this disclosure, embodiments of the system are presented to display the robust nature of the device. Figure 1 is a side elevation view of a vehicle 10 that includes a load warning system 12 in accordance with an embodiment of the invention. Details of embodiments of the load warning system 12 are provided below. The load warning system 12 provides an effective, simple and low-cost system to assist in maintaining safe loading conditions of the vehicle 10.

[0018] The vehicle 10 in the illustrated embodiment of Figure 1 is a truck, such as a pickup or flatbed truck, having a bed 16 that defines a load support area. The bed 16 is mounted on a frame 17 of the vehicle, and the frame is coupled to axles 18 and wheels 19 in a conventional manner via a suspension system 20. The suspension system 20 allows the rear axle 18 and the bed 16 to move relative to each other, for example, when a load 14 is placed in the bed 16 or during the operation of the vehicle. When the load 14 is placed in the bed 16, the weight of the load compresses the suspension system 20, thereby moving the frame 17 relative to the rear axle 18. The heavier the load 14, the more the suspension

system 20 will be compressed and the farther the bed 16 will move relative to the rear axle 18.

[0019] The load warning system 12 is configured to provide a warning signal to a user when the weight or the position of the load 14 in the bed 16 is sufficient to compress the suspension system 20 and move the frame 17 beyond a certain distance relative to the rear axle 18. The load warning system 12 is configured to provide a warning signal to a user when the weight of the load 14 exceeds a maximum weight, regardless of the load's position in the bed. The load warning system 12 is also configured to be activated if a certain load 14, which weights less than the maximum weight rated for the vehicle, is placed toward the rear of the bed 16. The load warning system 12 can also be configured to be activated if a certain load 14 less than the rated maximum weight is placed too far to one side of the bed 16. The load warning system 10 is also configured so it is less sensitive to weight that is placed in the cab of the truck, such as when a driver gets into a vehicle after it is loaded.

[0020] Figure 2 is a schematic plan view showing the load 14 in the bed 16 of the vehicle 10 of Figure 1. The load 14 can be distributed in the bed 16 in a variety of positions relative to the rear axle 18 of the vehicle 10. The position of the load 14 in the bed 16 can determine the extent to which the suspension system 20 is compressed and the rear portion of the frame 17 is moved relative to the rear axle 18. When the load 14 is directly over the rear axle 18 or rearward of the axle, the suspension system 20 will be compressed more and the frame 17 will move a greater distance relative to the rear axle than when the same load is in the forwardmost position in the bed 16. The load warning system 12 provides a warning signal when the load causes the frame 17 to move vertically or rotationally beyond a selected distance relative to the rear axle 18. The load warning system 12 could also be used in conjunction with other portions of the vehicle, such as the vehicle's front axle, to detect either underloading or overloading conditions based on the movement of the vehicle's frame 17 relative to a selected structure coupled to the suspension system 20.

[0021] Figure 3 is an enlarged top isometric view of the load warning system 12 shown installed on the vehicle 10 of Figure 1 in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention. Figure 4 is a partially exploded, enlarged isometric view of the components of the load warning system of Figure 3 shown removed from the vehicle. The load warning system 12 of the illustrated embodiment includes a frame bracket 22 that mounts with conventional fasteners to the frame 17 of the vehicle 10. In the illustrated embodiment, the frame bracket 22 is mounted to the frame 17 above and rearward of the rear axle 18. The frame bracket 22 is bolted or otherwise securely mounted to the frame 17 so the frame bracket moves with the frame as a unit. The illustrated frame bracket 22 extends in a cantilevered manner from the frame 17.

[0022] A switch assembly 28 is adjustably connected to a free end 26 of the frame bracket 22. The frame bracket 22 is shaped and sized to securely support the switch assembly 28 at a selected location and orientation relative to the rear axle 18. In the illustrated embodiment, the switch assembly 28 is positioned rearward of the rear axle 18. The shape and size required for the frame bracket 22 may be affected by the make and model of the vehicle 10 to which the load warning system 12 is being installed. As an example, the frame bracket 22 shown in Figures 3 and 4 is shaped and sized for use on a truck manufactured by Ford, namely, a truck having the F34 cab chassis. In an alternate embodiment shown in Figure 5, the frame bracket 22 is shaped and sized for use on GMC trucks. In other embodiments, different shapes and sizes of frame brackets 22 can be used with other vehicles. In yet other embodiments, the frame bracket 22 may be an integral component of the switch assembly 28.

[0023] As best seen in Figures 3-5, the switch assembly 28 includes a sealed housing 30 connected to a mounting plate 31, and the mounting plate is fastened to the frame bracket 22. The sealed housing 30 contains a microswitch 32 movable between a normal inactive position and an activated position. The switch assembly 28 has a flexible trigger member 34 connected to the microswitch 32 and sealably coupled to the housing 30 so as to provide a fully protected

environment for the microswitch. The microswitch 32 is moved from the normal, inactive position to the activated position by moving the trigger member 34 in any direction perpendicular to the trigger member's longitudinal axis.

[0024] The microswitch 32 in one embodiment is configured so the microswitch is open when in the normal, inactive position and closed when in the activated position. In this configuration, the switch assembly 28 draws no power when it is monitoring for overload condition. In the illustrated embodiment, the overload switch assembly 28 is a water-resistant assembly, such as the SWM 43 or 44 switch assembly manufactured by Precor, Inc. of Boise, Idaho. In alternate embodiments, other switch assemblies 28 can be used, including switch assemblies similar to the Precor switch assembly wired to be either in the "normally open" or "normally closed" position.

[0025] The mounting plate 31 extends from the sealed housing 30 and has a pair of apertures 36 that receive fasteners to connect to the free end 26 of the frame bracket 22. The free end 26 of the frame bracket 22 has corresponding receiving apertures 38 that align with the apertures 36 in the mounting plate 31. In the embodiment illustrated in Figures 3 and 4, the lower receiving aperture 38 in the frame bracket 22 is an elongated, arcuate slot that allows for adjustment of the angular orientation of the mounting bracket 31, and thus the switch assembly 28 relative to the frame 17.

[0026] In an alternate embodiment illustrated in Figure 5, the frame bracket 22 is an L-shaped bracket with an arcuate-shaped upper aperture 38 that allows for the positional adjustment of the switch assembly 28. The position of the switch assembly 28 and the trigger member 34 can be adjusted as needed upon installation, maintenance, or calibration of the load warning system 12. In other embodiments, the switch assembly 28 can be adjustably connected to the frame bracket 22 in other manners that allow for angular or positional adjustment of the switch assembly relative to the frame bracket.

[0027] Once the switch assembly 28 is in the desired position relative to the frame bracket 22, the fasteners are securely tightened so as to hold the switch assembly

in the selected position. The secured frame bracket 22 and the switch assembly 28 will move with the frame's cross member 24 as a unit relative to the rear axle 18, such as when the load 14 (Figure 1) is placed in the bed 16 and the suspension system 20 is compressed.

[0028] Figure 6 is a bottom isometric view of an embodiment of components of the load warning system 12 configured for a selected vehicle configuration. The load warning system 12 includes a second bracket 40 mounted to the rear axle 18 in a position forwardly adjacent to and spaced apart from the trigger member 34. In the illustrated embodiment, the bracket 40 is securely bolted at one end to a bell housing 42 of the rear axle 18 and positioned below the trigger member 34 by a selected distance. Accordingly, the bracket 40 moves with the rear axle 18 as a unit.

[0029] The bracket 40 is cantilevered such that the bracket's free end provides an engagement portion 44 below the trigger member 34 (Figure 6). The engagement portion 44 is positioned so the trigger member 34 presses against the engagement portion when the suspension system 20 is compressed and the frame 17 is moved beyond a selected distance relative to the rear axle 18. When the trigger member 34 is pressed against the engagement portion 44, the trigger member moves the microswitch 32 within the sealed housing 30 from the normal, inactive position to the activated position. Upon moving the microswitch 32 to the active position, a signal is generated that indicates a warning condition.

[0030] Operation of the switch assembly 28 is demonstrated when a load 14 (Figure 2) is put into the bed 16 (Figure 2) of the vehicle 10 (Figure 2). The suspension system 20 (Figure 2) will be compressed so that the cross member 24 and the switch assembly 28 move as a unit downwardly relative to the rear axle 18 and the bracket 40. When the weight and/or position of the load 14 in the bed 16 is such that the trigger member 34 moves toward the bracket's engagement portion 44 but does not press against it, the microswitch 32 in the switch assembly 28 remains in the normal, inactive position so a warning signal is not generated.

[0031] When a load 14 in the bed 16 (Figure 2) exceeds a maximum weight rated for the vehicle 10, and the load is generally centered in the bed forward of the rear axle 18, the load causes the suspension system 20 (Figure 2) to compress substantially vertically. As the suspension system 20 compresses, the trigger member 34 presses against the bracket's engagement portion 44, and the microswitch 32 is moved to the activated position, thereby indicating an overload condition. When a load 14 is placed in the bed 16 directly over the rear axle 18, the load can compress the suspension system 20 so the trigger mechanism 34 engages the bracket's engagement portion 44 to indicate an improper load condition, even though the load weighs less than the maximum weight rated for the vehicle.

[0032] When a load 14 is placed in the bed 16 behind the rear axle 18, the load will compress the suspension system 20 vertically and also cause the bed to slightly rotate about an axis of rotation generally close to the rear axle. As the bed rotates, the rear end of the bed drops and the front end of the vehicle 10 can be raised. As the bed 16 rotates relative to the rear axle 18 past a certain distance, it causes the trigger member 34 to engage the bracket's engagement portion 44. Such rotational motion will often occur when the load 14 is less than the maximum weight limit rated for the vehicle. In one embodiment, a load that is approximately 70% of the rated maximum load for the vehicle can activate the load warning system 12 and provide the warning of an improper load condition. Therefore, the load warning system 12 provides a warning when the load exceeds a rated maximum weight or when the weight and position of the load in the bed causes an undesirable loading condition even though the load is below the rated maximum load.

[0033] After the trigger member 34 has moved the microswitch 32 to the activated position, the microswitch will remain in the activated position until the load 14 (Figure 2) is adjusted or reduced so the switch assembly 28 moves upwardly until the trigger member 34 is lifted out of engagement with the engagement portion 44 of the bracket 40. The microswitch 32 and the trigger member 34 are biased or

otherwise urged toward the normal, inactive position. After the trigger member 34 is lifted from the engagement portion 44, the microswitch 32 returns to the normal, inactive position.

[0034] In the illustrated embodiments, the switch assembly 28 is activated by engaging the bracket 40. In alternate embodiments for use on selected vehicles, the switch assembly 28 may be configured and positioned adjacent to another structure on the vehicle 10, so that the trigger member 34 will move into engagement with that structure when a load is applied to the vehicle. The trigger member 34 will then trip the microswitch 32 so as to generate a warning signal indicating the improper load condition.

[0035] In another alternate embodiment, the switch assembly 28 may be mounted at another location on the vehicle 10 such that the frame 17 will move relative to the other location when a load 14 is applied to the vehicle. For example, the switch assembly 28 could be mounted to the front portion of the vehicle's frame 17 adjacent to the front axle, so the trigger member 34 is below an engagement structure. If the vehicle 10 is loaded such that the front of the vehicle's frame 17 is lifted upwardly relative to the front axle, the upward movement of the frame will bring the trigger member 34 into engagement with the engagement portion 44 of the bracket 40, thereby moving the microswitch 32 to the activated position to indicate an overload or underload configuration. Accordingly, the load warning system 12 is very effective when applying a load 14 to the bed 16 of a vehicle 10, as well as when other loads are applied to the vehicle's frame 17, such as via a trailer or the like.

[0036] As best seen in Figures 5 and 6, the trigger member 34 is an elongated flexible member that can resiliently bend when pressed with sufficient force against the bracket 40. The trigger member 34 of the illustrated embodiment is an elongated, tightly wound coil spring coupled to the microswitch 32. The microswitch 32 has a very small dead band (i.e., the range of motion before the microswitch moves to the activated position), so that the microswitch can be

moved to the activated position when a fairly small force is exerted against the trigger member 34.

[0037] The flexible trigger member 34 has sufficient stiffness so it will not substantially bend or deflect before the microswitch 32 is moved to the activated position. If, however, the movement of the vehicle's frame 17 relative to the rear axle 18 is extreme, so that the trigger member 34 is pressed hard against the bracket's engagement portion 44, the trigger member will resiliently bend so as to prevent extreme forces being applied directly to the microswitch 32. Further, when the vehicle 10 (Figure 2) is in operation and encounters significant impact to the suspension system 20 (Figure 2), such as by hitting a large bump or pot hole, the flexible trigger member 34 can hit and bend against the engagement portion 44 and then return to its original position, thereby protecting the switch assembly 28 from damage. Accordingly, the switch assembly 28 is a simple, rugged, and weather-resistant assembly.

[0038] As best seen in Figures 4 and 5, the switch assembly 28 has an electrical cable 50 extending through the housing 30 and connected at one end to the microswitch 32. A seal is provided between the electrical cable 50 and the housing 30 to maintain the sealed environment in the housing around the microswitch 32. In one embodiment, the electrical cable 50 has a pair of mating connectors 60 and 62 (Figure 7) releasably connected to each other adjacent to the switch assembly 28. In one embodiment, a short length of heat-shrink tubing is provided over both connectors 60 and 62.

[0039] Figure 7 is a schematic view showing the electrical cable 50 routed along selected portions of the vehicle 10 and connected to the vehicle's electrical center 54. In one embodiment, the electrical cable 50 extends from the switch assembly 28 and is routed along the existing vehicle's wire bundles, such as along the driver's side. The electrical cable 50 is secured to the vehicle's wire bundles using conventional wire ties or other conventional securing mechanisms.

[0040] The end of the electrical cable 50 opposite the switch assembly 28 is attached to a relay assembly 52 that connects to the electrical center 54. The

relay assembly 52 is coupled to a warning indicator 55. Accordingly, when an improper load condition exists and the trigger member 34 causes the microswitch 32 to move to the activated position, the signal generated from the microswitch is provided to the relay assembly 52. The relay assembly 52 provides a signal to the electrical center 54 so as to activate the warning indicator 55 so as to provide an audible and/or visual warning to the user that the improper load condition has occurred.

[0041] In one embodiment, the relay assembly 52 is connected to the electrical center 54 so as to activate an audible warning indicator 55, such as the vehicle horn or an auxiliary horn, that generates a sound indicating that an improper load condition exists. The audible warning indicator 55 will continue to sound until the load is lessened or shifted so as to move the microswitch 32 back to the normal, inactive position. In an alternate embodiment, a visual warning indicator, such as flashing vehicle lights or an auxiliary warning light, will appear to indicate that an improper load condition exists. In yet another alternate embodiment, both audible and visual warning indicators can be used.

[0042] As best seen in Figure 8, the relay assembly 52 includes two relays 64 and 66 mounted on a mounting plate 68. The first relay 64 connects to the vehicle's start relay in the electrical center 54 (Figure 7), and the second relay 66 connects to the vehicle's horn relay, also in the electrical center. The relay assembly 52 is configured so that, when the switch assembly 28 (Figure 7) is activated, the vehicle's horn will sound until the improper load condition has been corrected. The first relay 64 is configured so the load warning system 12 (Figure 7) will only provide the audible warning signal, e.g., sounding the vehicle's horn, when the vehicle is in park or neutral. If the vehicle 10 is in reverse or any drive gear, the load warning system 12 will not sound the horn if an improper load condition exists. When the vehicle 10 is being driven and it hits a large bump, the load warning system 12 of the illustrated embodiment will not sound the horn.

[0043] As indicated above, the load warning system 12 draws no power when in the normal, inactive position, such that there is no drain on the vehicle's battery,

and no current flows through the starter relay unless the ignition key activates the starter. Accordingly, the load warning system 12 of the illustrated embodiment has no separate ON/OFF switch, no lights to manually turn on or off, and nothing for the operator to do except to reduce or shift the load 14 on the vehicle 10 when the load warning system 12 indicates an improper load condition has occurred.

[0044] In an alternate embodiment of the invention, the relay assembly 52 can be coupled to a different audible warning device, such as an alarm, or to a visible warning indicator mechanism, such as a warning light or the like. In another embodiment, the load warning system can bypass the starter relay, and the system includes a data processor 80 (shown in phantom lines in Figure 7) operatively coupled to the switch assembly 28. The processor 80 is configured to provide continual monitoring of the switch assembly 28 to determine the frequency and/or duration of time that the microswitch 32 is in the activated position while the vehicle is stationary or being driven. When a selected condition exists, such as a number of activations over a selected period or specified duration of time that the microswitch 32 remains in the activated position, the processor 80 will provide a signal to activate the warning indicator 55. In this embodiment, if the vehicle 10 is in motion and the trigger member 34 is occasionally activated because of road disturbances, the processor 80 will be able to identify these occasional activations without activating the warning indicator 55. If, as an example, the load 14 in the vehicle 10 shifts during transportation, thereby resulting in substantially continuous activation of the microswitch 32 to indicate an improper load condition, the processor 80 would detect the change and a warning signal would be provided to the user that an improper load condition exists.

[0045] When the load warning system 12 is installed on the vehicle 10 either as original equipment or as a retrofit, the system is calibrated to provide a warning signal when the load exceeds a selected maximum load. The load warning system 12 can be easily and quickly calibrated by placing a known maximum load 14 into the bed 16 of the vehicle 10 at a selected location and then adjusting the

position of the switch assembly 28 relative to the bracket 40. In one embodiment shown in Figure 2, the calibration load 14 is 3,000 pounds \pm 30 pounds. The load 14 has a footprint of approximately 30" x 30", and the load is placed so the load's center is approximately 26" \pm 3" behind the front of the bed 16. The load 14 is centered laterally within approximately 2" of the vehicle's centerline.

[0046] As best seen in Figure 3 from under the vehicle 10, the fasteners connecting the switch assembly 28 to the frame bracket 22 are then loosened. The switch assembly 28 is then rotated until the trigger member 34 contacts the engagement portion 44 of the bracket 40 just enough so that the microswitch 32 moves to the activated position thereby sounding the horn. The switch assembly 28 is then secured in this position relative to the frame bracket 22, so as to be in a final calibrated position. After the switch assembly 28 is secured in the final calibration position, a person should be able to push upwardly on a portion of the frame 17 rearward of the rear axle 18 enough to cause the trigger member 34 to move the microswitch 32 back to the normal, inactive position.

[0047] The configuration of the load warning system 12 on the vehicle 10 as discussed above is such that the location of the measurement point determines how the system will react as the center of gravity of the load 14 is moved around on the bed 16 or other load support area of the vehicle. The load warning system 12 is configured to minimize the effect of a driver's weight. The load warning system 12 of the illustrated embodiment is also configured to generate the warning signal in the event a reduced load, such as approximately 70% of the maximum load, is placed too far rearward in the bed 16 of the vehicle 10. In this configuration, the reduced load will cause the compression of the suspension system 20 and rotation of the frame 17 relative to the rear axle 18, thereby indicating an improper load configuration. In this overload configuration, the load rearward of the rear axle 18 can cause the forward portion of the vehicle's frame 17 to lift so as to reduce the weight on the vehicle's front wheels, thereby resulting in the overload condition at the rear end and an undesirable underload condition at the forward end of the vehicle.

[0048] After the load warning system 12 is calibrated, the calibration load is removed from the bed 16 and the vehicle 10 can be used in regular operation. The load warning system 12 can be easily recalibrated as needed, for example, if the vehicle's suspension system 20 relaxes or softens over time. The load warning system 12 can also be easily and quickly tested by reaching under the vehicle 10 and manually moving the trigger member 34 to confirm that the warning signal will be generated in an improper load condition. If any system components have been damaged, or require replacement or maintenance, such as the microswitch 32, the flexible trigger member 34, the brackets 22 and 40, the electrical cable 50 or the like, the component can be quickly and easily removed and replaced, thereby minimizing the amount of time the vehicle is out of service.

[0049] In one embodiment, the load warning system 12 includes a data collector 70, shown schematically in Figure 7, operatively connected to the vehicle 10 and to the switch assembly 28. The data collector 70 is configured to collect data during operation of the vehicle, and the data can be downloaded or otherwise output for analysis. The data collector 70 can be configured to collect and output data, including, for example, the time, date and duration of operation, or the frequency or duration of activation of the switch assembly. The data collector 70 can also be connected to a conventional load cell (not shown) to collect and output data about the weight of the load(s) applied to the vehicle 10.

[0050] The data from the data collector 70 can then be used in any number of ways, including determining when routine maintenance may be needed for the load warning system 12. If the vehicle is a rental vehicle, the data collector 70 could be used to determine whether conditions existed during operation that justifies different charges or costs to the renter of the vehicle. Accordingly, the load warning system 12 can be used for more than just determining if an improper load condition exists.

[0051] From the above detailed description, it will be appreciated that specific embodiments of the invention are described herein for purposes of illustration, but

that various modifications may be made without deviating from the spirit and scope of the invention.